

Saskatchewan Synod, ELCIC Convention  
Opening Service 2008  
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Colossians 3:1-4; John 15:12-17  
Bishop Cindy Halmarson  
June 12, 2008

Grace and peace to you in the name of Christ who is our life and salvation.  
Grace and peace as we gather as the 12<sup>th</sup> Biennial Convention of  
Saskatchewan Synod.

God has called us here to Assiniboia as representatives of congregations, rostered ministers, visitors, synod leaders and honored guests, to hear the word of the Lord to our synod in this time and place. Individually and together we come with our eyes and ears open to God's call, ready to hear how we might be part of God's plan to love and bless the world. We come with the history of eleven previous conventions, twenty-two years of being shaped into God's servant church. We come with pre-histories that root us in traditions of worship, loving service to our neighbor, and deep devotion to our God. With humble hearts we look to God to call us forward, through these days together in Assiniboia, into the next period of our life together, the next biennium and beyond, to live faithfully into the future that God will give us.

As we join our hearts and minds in worship, reflection, deliberation and decision, we are reminded that we gather as a people called, not by our own power or will, but by the God over death and life who we know through the Lord of Life, Jesus Christ. By the love of Christ we believe and confess that God makes life to abound by grace and mercy, and we commit ourselves to our calling to join with God in renewing our lives, the church, and the world that God loves.

So, we are here to listen to the word of the Lord – to God's word that calls us to life; to God's word that calls us to community; to God's word that calls us to mission.

Life abundant is what Jesus promises in John's gospel. Life in all its fullness is the vision that God offer us – from the overflowing cup in the Twenty-third Psalm to the river of the water of life in the Book of Revelation. Life is what Jesus gives to the daughter of Jairus, to the mother-in-law of Peter, and

to Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus. Living beings have a death-defying instinct toward life that will lead a trapped fox to gnaw off its own paw in order to get free; that will give a parent super-human strength in order to save the life of a child. We will do what has to be done to keep the life cycle going.

And yet, consider the state of our world today, the condition of the physical creation, the political and social unease in society, the way that millions live in poverty, hunger, endless conflict, inadequate shelter and violence. Look at the situation in our own communities. We experience an epidemic of disease borne of the abuse of alcohol, drugs and poor nutrition. Violence in families leads to generational abuse, the breakdown of family, injury, and death. We stress over providing a living for our families and saving for retirement, hoping that our pension or the value of our property will outlive our financial needs.

If this is life, who needs it?

And you and I know about those who have given up, who have been defeated, whose lives lay like dry bones scattered in a dry valley. Lifeless, we say. And maybe you and I find ourselves in that dry place as well. Discouraged and without hope. About life, about our world, about our church.

When Roger Haugen and I travel this synod and meet with congregations, we hear from leaders unsure about their future. They count out the years remaining according to the funds in the term deposits. They petition the synod to allow an amendment to their constitution to reduce the number on their congregational council and congregational meeting quorum because they can't fulfill the requirements in the model constitution for congregations. They reduce the level of pastoral ministry to half or a third or a quarter of full time because that's all the offerings will pay for. And if they're really honest with themselves, they recognize that given the age of the membership, it won't be long before the last person turns out the lights in their beloved church building.

In other congregations there is no imminent threat of closure, but the spirit of the place is unwell. Congregations can become isolated even if they exist in the middle of a city, so tuned into their own program and people that they neglect to pay attention to or participate in the work of the wider church or

in the community around them. A congregation may become so focused on one issue or one preoccupation that its members fail to thrive within the full Body of Christ. In rostered ministers discouragement and burnout or preoccupation with personal or family needs can keep them from providing strong and healthy leadership.

The Lord has a word for congregations and church leaders in such a state. The word of the Lord says, “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.” The image from Ezekiel is of bones joined to bones, sinews joining the bones and flesh covering the sinews, and skin covering all. But even though joined together by connective tissue, there is no life in the bones until the spirit is breathed into the people and there is life, a vast multitude.

I am calling in the name of the Lord that the breath of the spirit will enliven us, will bring us together bone to bone, hand to hand, congregation to congregation. This convention will be asked to approve a revised strategic plan that puts flesh on the bones of our desire to fulfill God’s mission through dynamic congregations and ministries; able ministers; strong vital partnerships; a vision outside and beyond ourselves; and a strategy to reach out in love to our neighbors. I pray during this convention and during the biennium to come that God will breathe new life into the members and congregations and ministries of Saskatchewan Synod so that we can stand together, a vast multitude, as witness to God’s power over death and life.

God calls us to life – life that is created by God’s word and life that is sustained by the breath of the spirit. Every breath we take is by the grace of God. And so it is our calling to count life as precious, even our own life, and the life of our church. Without God our life is dry as dry bones. Even with God we are nothing except for what God does through us and with us. And what God wants to do is give life, raise up life, and restore life as God has already done in Jesus. God calls us out of our isolation, out of our preoccupation, out of our stress and worry and into life abundant, to be lived fully and shared with those around us. This is our call, the call to life.

God’s call places us in community, the community we call the church, and the communities in which our church lives and ministers.

In the healing stories about Jesus we marvel at his power over illness and infirmity. We are amazed that by his word or touch, flesh is restored to

health and persons born without abilities are able to walk, see or speak. But more amazing is the result of these healings. Because when Jesus gives a child back her life, when Jesus heals the lepers, when a demoniac is set free from his tortuous existence, in every case the person healed is restored to community. They join or rejoin family and community as ones who belong by the grace of God in Jesus.

Belonging is a gift that God gives through the church that is called, gathered, enlightened and made holy to be God's agent in the world. Washed in the waters of baptism we are joined to the family of God and made members of the priesthood we all share in Christ. The welcome that Christ Jesus offers is to all people, especially those rejected by society. In his lifetime Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. He sought out the ostracized and made lots of time for the people on the fringe. Jesus is our example as we live out what it means to be the community of people gathered in Christ's name.

And so we are called to examine the extent of our welcome. How big and broad is the community we embody in the name of Christ? Can we be so confident in the breadth of God's love as to offer it to all regardless of their qualification or disqualification by any standards we may want to impose?

Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Called to community in Christ, we can do no other – except that we are limited by our sin, the infirmity that keeps us from following faithfully the example of Jesus. That's no excuse, only a statement of reality and a confession of our need to seek God's forgiveness and grace as we stumble through our dealings with differences, disagreements and diversity.

Our community, our unity in Christ is threatened by division over the welcome our church will give to persons regardless of their sexual orientation. This convention will receive a report from the Dialogue Task Force that will tell us what we already know: We disagree on our understanding of sexual diversity; we disagree on the reading of scripture in this regard; we disagree whether homosexual orientation and practice should disqualify a person from authorization for ministry.

I wish I were wise enough to offer a way through this dilemma. I am not.

Others, wiser people than I, have described our disagreement about homosexuality as a conflict in values, conflict at the most deeply-held level

and almost impossible to resolve since one side will not be convinced by arguments from the other side. Our task force discovered that in their meetings and it's in their report. The best that one can hope for in a conflict in values is that the two sides will recognize that there is a higher value at stake, a higher value that unites the sides even while they hold their disagreement.

If I have any wisdom to offer to our synod, our congregations and leaders, and our church at large, it is that God values us, God values the church as the Body of Christ in the world, to such an extent that Christ died for us. By the love of God we are called into community which is unity in Christ's name, a unity that we reject at our peril and at peril of our faithful fulfillment of God's mission. And so Jesus' definition of love may be the word of the Lord for us to hear, that, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Can we lay down our differences for the sake of our friendship and communion in Christ? Can we find a way to agree to disagree and set our church policies accordingly?

That's more than I intended to say about this matter when I began to prepare for this convention. But it's the word that I hear for our church and our synod. And it leads us to the third dimension of calling that I want to speak to.

God's word calls us to mission.

Over the past 120 years or so the meaning of the word "mission" has undergone a transformation. Before the beginning of the last century, "mission" was what the established church did in the colonies, bringing the word of the Lord to people in Africa, Asia, South America and the frontiers of North America. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was to be the Christian Century when the world was to be converted to Christian faith. It was a noble goal, and scriptural! Many fine church people contributed to the mission goals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of them in the established churches in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. With the best of intentions, and in response to Christ's command, we committed ourselves to make disciples of all nations.

But assumptions that accompanied that mission mind-set ran rough-shod over cultural values and practices that were deemed to be un-Christian, because they were "un-civilized" according to the sensibilities of the

missionaries and people from established churches in North America and Europe. We are learning with humility the high price paid by people in the colonies and in frontier Canada who were “mission-ized” by the church. The residential schools and the aftermath of their scandal are a Canadian example of the negative effects of this mission. Our Prime Minister this week acknowledged the deep wrongs perpetrated on Indian children and their families through policies of our government that were implemented in church-run schools. Though the Lutheran churches were not involved in those programs, as Canadians we share the burden of responsibility as we share in the legacy of those policies and practices in today’s society.

During our convention we will examine how we might foster better neighbor relations with aboriginal people in our communities and our society as an expression of the love that God offers to the world through us.

I said that our understanding of “mission” has changed over the past century or more. Over time we began to see that mission didn’t only happen overseas. Mission was what congregations in our church were to do in order to grow and reach more people. Mission programs were developed, congregations worked on mission statements, and pastors were encouraged to get out and knock on the doors in their community to invite people into the church. We tried to set off an evangelism explosion so that people would be tripping over themselves to join us for Sunday worship, Friday youth group, Wednesday morning bible study, and all the other programs that we might offer.

Well, a societal shift has undermined that way of doing mission. Sports and weekend jobs and travel undercut our exclusive claim on the holy hour of Sunday morning. Mistrust of institutions of every kind undermines our ability to address the deepest needs of people for belonging and meaning. Now, one or two entire generations have lost the connection to their church home – because of lack of interest, lack of example or because they’ve moved away to another city, another province or another country. Getting people to come to church is a losing proposition. When we invite them they smell our desperation to increase our numbers, increase our budget, increase our likelihood of survival...

And so our understanding of mission shifts again –back to Jesus’ example and charge to us. The word of the Lord to us is this: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you...”

Mission is not our act accomplished by our will or power. It is not the application of our money or our commitment. Mission is God's intention for the world, revealed in Jesus Christ.

And God's intention is love, loving humankind despite our sin, despite our rejection, despite our division and our misguided intentions. God's intention is to love the world until the world returns God's love in peace, in care for "the least of these", in justice for all and in an end to hypocrisy, pride, arrogance and greed. God's mission is to love and renew the world and God uses the church to be the agent of love and witness in Christ's name. We who are called and gathered into the congregations of Saskatchewan Synod are recruited into God's mission. And so, as we consider what God is calling us to do and be as members, congregations, leaders and a synod, we look to God for direction and the means to accomplish that mission.

Jesus said, "I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last..."

As we consider the mission of Saskatchewan Synod within God's mission to love the world into abundant life, we ask ourselves – what is the fruit that will last? How can we put ourselves behind God's mission of love? In what ways can we as a community of fallible but faithful followers best live out God's call?

Well, laying down our life is the example that Jesus set. So how can we do that? How about letting go of our death-defying hold on survival at any price – and recognizing that being missional may not build up our congregations as we know them – and being ready to adopt new ways of organizing our congregations and our church, and training our pastors and diaconal ministers, so that we can put resources and energies where they will have the most impact – and finding ways to honor what has been while we shift to what will be in light of our discernment of God's mission in our time and place – and striking vital partnerships with others. These are ways that we might lay down our life in faithfulness to God's call to mission.

We are here at this convention to listen to the word of the Lord – to God's word that calls us to life; to God's word that calls us to community; to God's word that calls us to mission.

God in Christ has claimed us, blessed us, and gives us more than enough of everything we need to fulfill God's mission – money, abilities, able workers, compassion. This evening, and throughout this convention, we look to God for guidance, direction and the gift of deep devotion to God that will spur us to commit ourselves to God's mission of love and peace in our time.

May God make it so. Amen.